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ABSTRACT

This report explores the perspectives, issues, and capacity building needs of 51 community organizations that are fighting for better public schools nationwide. It analyzes a series of interviews conducted between July 2000 and March 2002. The interviews involved organizers, senior staff, and parent leaders. Overall, respondents described a range of problems that they were trying to correct. The categories most frequently cited as issues tended to direct organizational attention away from areas related to the core content of teaching and learning (e.g., after-school enrichment opportunities; accountability at the school, district, and political level; parent and community involvement; broadening the role of the school in the community; and equity concerns). Issues and perceived needs were not always in synch. Recommendations include acting national even when issues are local, always confronting racism, incorporating traditional civil rights organizations into the education justice infrastructure, and sharing data. The three appendices present organizations interviewed for the report, categories of topics raised by respondents, and questions from data and policy needs assessments. (Contains 12 tables.) (SM)

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UNLOCKING THE SCHOOLHOUSE DOOR

The Community Struggle For A Say In Our Children's Education

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April 2002

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We are a stand-alone institute jointly sponsored by the Graduate Schools of Education and Social Service at the Fordham University Lincoln Center Campus in New York City. Our core mission is to provide data and policy analysis, research, leadership development, and other technical support to strengthen community-led school reform campaigns. We work with grassroots community organizations to address inequality among schools in terms of their educational resources and leadership as well as the broader conditions that perpetuate such inequality. We also evaluate programs and policies aimed at improving educational outcomes for low-income children, with an emphasis on participatory evaluation designs and action research to build the knowledge base, skill level, and political sophistication of grassroots school reform leaders.

Over the past year, we have provided data analyses for parent-led campaigns confronting the equity issues embedded in the distribution of teaching resources in Albuquerque, Baltimore, Boston, Denver, Philadelphia, Portland, and St. Louis. We also produced background reports on various education-related topics for other groups in Chicago, Denver, and New York City. In New York City, we have convened a number of community, youth, and policy organizations to form the Fair Discipline Policy Task Force. We conduct an evaluation of a federally funded GEARUP program targeting a cohort of 2,000 Bronx middle school students and another for the *Virtual Y* After School Program that serves approximately 100 elementary schools throughout New York City.

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Unlocking the Schoolhouse Door

National Center for Schools and Communities
Fordham University

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When the leaders and staff of community organizations want to know what is on the minds of their members, neighbors, or constituents, they go out doorknocking or set up one-on-ones. The constituents of the National Center for Schools and Communities are grassroots groups across the United States, so we had to do our outreach by phone, but our objective was the same: find out what your issues were and what we could do to support your organizing around those issues. Our first thanks, therefore, goes to the organizers and leaders who took time from their incredibly hectic schedules to share their perspectives with us and other organizations engaged in the fight for high quality public schools for all our neighborhoods.

Unlocking the Schoolhouse Door is one of a pair of inquiries growing out of our Scan Project, which explored the role of community organizations in school reform, and Building Bridges, which develops strategies for integrating the work of different sectors of the education justice movement. (We are also issuing the companion piece, *From Schoolhouse to Statehouse* by Tom Kamber, Ph.D.) We are grateful to the funders of these two strands of work, the Albert A. List Foundation, Foundation for Child Development, Nathan Cummings Foundation, Needmor Fund, Open Society Institute, the Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock, and the Valentine Fund of the Tides Foundation. We thank them for their patience as well as their funding.

Dara Barlin, John M. Beam, Marc Chun, Gillian Eddins, Mike Eskenazi, and Diane Pagen interviewed representatives from participating groups. Kate Scefonas joined Beam, Eddins, Eskenazi, and Pagen in performing an extensive content analysis of the interviews. They and Sharmeen Irani wrote and edited the report. Gillian Eddins supervised the presentation of data. Kate Scefonas and Sara Sterling provided production and logistical support. Grace Suh of Grand Street Design Works consulted on formatting. Leigh Dingerson at the Center for Community Change in Washington, D.C. and Heather Roe Mahoney at the Democracy Resource Center in Lexington, Kentucky reviewed the draft and provided invaluable feedback.

Dean Regis Bernhardt of the Graduate School of Education and Dean Peter Vaughan of the Graduate School of Social Service provide the Center with essential moral and programmatic support. Neither they nor our funders are responsible for the views expressed in this report, which are strictly those of the National Center for Schools and Communities and in no way represent the institutional views of Fordham University.

John M. Beam
Executive Director

HIGHLIGHTS

Public education has finally captured the rhetorical attention, if not the necessary sustained commitment, of national and local politicians and the candidates seeking to replace them. Debates rage in the halls of Congress and the national news media over the merits of charter schools, national testing, and professional versus corporate versus political control of inner city public school systems.

Meanwhile, in the real world where children actually go to school, a teacher in New York City has to collect the 27 social studies texts that this class of 35 students just shared because she needs them for two more classes today. A parent in Denver notices that the worksheets her kid is bringing home this year are identical to ones he brought home in an earlier grade. Prison officials in California and Mississippi project long range needs for new cells based on third grade reading scores and drop out rates, respectively.

Grassroots organizations across the United States confront the effects of local, state, and federal neglect of schools that serve low-income children in general and children of color in particular. These organizations do so with sporadic media coverage, sparse funding, and often few allies. In some parts of the country, parents demanding school reform run the risk of arrest, economic sanctions, or retaliation against their children.

Unlocking the Schoolhouse Door explores the perspectives, issues, and capacity building needs of 51 community organizations that are fighting for better public schools across the United States by analyzing a series of interviews conducted between late July 2000 and early March of this year.

To identify both shared priorities and interesting localized concerns, we sorted respondents' comments into broad categories and then determined the functions each category served for a particular group—issue, information/capacity-building, or context. A category could serve more than one function.

Issues

For purposes of this discussion, an *issue* is a problem that people understand as being susceptible to policy change and around which they are willing to organize.

The categories most frequently cited as *issues* tended to direct organizational attention away from areas related to the core content of teaching and learning:

- After-school, enrichment, extracurricular activities, sports programming (49 percent of interviewed groups).

- Accountability of schools, teachers, and principals to students and parents; parent and student rights (42 percent).
- Community engagement including parent, community, congregational involvement; school leadership teams; and community/extended service schools (39 percent).
- Equity concerns, chiefly around racially but also geographically and income skewed distribution of educational resources (also 39 percent).

Three out of these four focus on winning access to or maintaining a toehold in the political realm where decisions are made about our public schools. In other words, groups showed a strong interest in the power dimensions of school issues.[1] The most frequently cited category—after-school, extracurricular, and sports activities—addresses an important aspect of educational programming that affects attendance, discipline, and even some academic outcomes but still leaves parents and their organizations on the margins of decisions about how educational practice is defined and educational resources are divvied up.

Equity issues are about the ways in which the educational policy making process discriminates on the basis of student race, language, or disability. No group mentions gender-based issues (e.g., girls and math). Paradoxically, very few organizations assign any priority to youth voice, let alone youth empowerment. Together, privatization, vouchers, and charter schools—highly charged topics from an equity perspective—rank last as a problem to which these particular organizations seem likely to devote scarce organizing resources.

Data and Analysis

The distribution of the information and capacity building needs of surveyed groups is less concentrated than issues and leads with:

- School specific and comparative data (49 percent).
- Data to document equity problems (27.5 percent).
- Academics, including achievement, expectations, models, whole school reform strategies, curricula, and best practices (23.5 percent).

There is an interesting disconnect between the organizing priorities of many organizations and perceived information needs. For example, the percentage of groups

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[1] Theoretically, accountability or governance mechanisms might take the community conversation toward issues of content and pedagogy, but with very few exceptions that was not the direction being taken in groups we interviewed for this study.

that consider professional development an *issue* is fifteen times greater than the percentage of groups interested in *knowing* more about the topic.

A specific question probed for Internet based information needs (26). The leading topic which groups (41 percent) would like available on the Internet is comparative information about best practices in other school systems.

Presented with several potential information products, respondents consider as "very useful" a set of items revolving around local conditions and money: neighborhood school budgets, school level information, and district budgets at 69 percent, 65 percent, and 61 percent, respectively.

The Political Environment

This set of categories also helps define the political environment or *context* in which groups work:

- Economics—economic system, economic and community development, poverty, employment (31 percent).
- Community engagement (nearly 20 percent).
- Racism (14 percent).

Additional Findings and Discussion

We cast our analytical net more broadly in our data pool to pull up respondent opinions about a number of subjects, whether or not those subjects are currently issues. We interrogated our interview notes about race; parent involvement; organization relationship to teacher quality; and the interplay of school safety, facilities, and school quality.

- Fifty-three percent of the groups mention one or more categories of issues that frequently entail some level of race consciousness, cultural competency, or institutional racism.

We were compelled to invent a category called "lockdown" to distinguish traditional discipline issues from problems such as police dogs in the schools and a school budget line item to arm school security guards with shotguns and tasers.

- The majority of respondents (58 percent) indicate that parent involvement in public schools is low in their communities.

This finding should not be confused with a comment on the parent participation in the efforts of their local community organizations. Heading the list of reasons parents are not more involved in the schools (e.g., PTA) is a sense that the school or administration is generally unwelcoming (46 percent).

- Most respondents (61 percent) feel that the concentration of inexperienced and poorly prepared teachers in schools serving low-income children is the result of policies or decisions within the control of school administrators.
- School safety and the facilities question tap into a belief on the part of many organizers and parents that policy makers and administrators have no commitment to marginalized children.

Although only a subset of respondents focused on school safety and facilities, for that group these topics trigger strong, even vehement reactions. Many organizers are convinced that dilapidated schools are allowed to exist in marginalized communities through deliberate neglect.

> *There is no political will to invest in these populations. Facilities are a race and class issue. Poorer neighborhoods get less money.*
>
> *They know it takes money to equip a school in a middle class neighborhood, but won't do it in a poorer neighborhood.*

Observations and Options

Reforming public education is a question of system change and redistribution of power and resources, neither of which is a process that happens overnight. Community organizations can provide continuity to school reform fights that school-based organizations cannot sustain. Community organizations are able to approach local problems holistically and, therefore, to position or relate school reform work to the appropriate context; for example, grassroots groups can link school issues to relevant concerns beyond the school; e.g., housing development or police accountability. Having a multi issue agenda allows an organization to pursue long-term education campaigns while maintaining and building a base by organizing around more immediately winnable issues.

Public education in the United States is overwhelmingly local. School reform organizing, therefore, frequently confronts the most mundane bureaucratic symptom of pathologies that, at the macro level, help define American society. Unlike the blind men of the fable, however, the organizers and parents whom we interviewed have a fairly clear image of the elephant blocking the children in our neighborhoods from receiving a high quality public education:

> *[We need to understand] who is in power, why they're doing it, how to fight it. It's about power.*
>
> *If you don't improve the poverty, you'll never improve the schools.*
>
> *The causes behind problems like these are racism, classism, and entrenched opposition to change.*

We conclude our report by raising a number of questions and points for discussion among the community organizations, intermediaries, and funders within the education justice movement:

- Even though much school reform organizing is local, we can raise shared concerns to national scrutiny.
- Actually improving the quality of education takes time. Community groups may need to adjust their expectations and organizing style. They should be more aggressive about using existing resources to ensure that their information and internal capacity will meet the demands of their school-related campaigns.
- With a broader perspective and relatively low-key mechanisms that encourage collaboration, community organizations, policy advocacy organizations, and progressive foundations could constitute a powerful infrastructure for grassroots school reform.
- Economics is the leading context for the groups participating in this study, and the references to the unjust treatment of low-income students and their parents permeate the interviews. Many groups focus on budget equality for low-income students. Beyond financial issues there are sometimes more fundamental equity issues related to the quality of resources available to low-income students. Policy advocacy organizations can work with local organizations to construct equity analyses that enable them to push the debate past the size of the appropriation to an understanding of the value of the educational resources it purchases.
- Given the centrality of race in school reform questions and the historic contribution of the civil rights movement to raising the issue of education as a human right, the school reform movement needs a strategy to incorporate the traditional national civil rights organizations into the infrastructure supporting education justice.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few months we conducted 52 interviews with organizers, senior staff, and parent leaders of 51 community organizations around the United States to discuss their organizations' involvement in local school reform. Our objectives for this project included:

- To advance the communal understanding of school-related organizing and share that understanding with community organizations, intermediaries, and funders for whom school reform is a priority.
- To determine policy analysis, information, and capacity-building needs of community organizations on the front lines of school reform, in particular needs that might be filled by policy advocacy organizations, including ours.
- To expand the network of groups with which the Center is in contact and identify specific projects on which we might collaborate.
- To provide an updated point of comparison with interviews performed during 1999-2000 for our Scan Project, which are summarized in a companion study to this one.

Through coincidences of production schedules, three complementary takes on organizing for school reform will be in circulation this spring. *Unlocking the Schoolhouse Door*, this latest offering of our Scan Project, explores the education related priorities of a range of community organizations with constituencies for whom school reform is a pressing concern as well as the variety of data and analytical assistance such groups might need to be even more effective. The New York University Institute for Education and Social policy is releasing *Mapping the Field of Organizing for School Improvement*, which focuses on seven major cities and one region to draw lessons from the experience of dozens of groups.[2] The report on the first phase of the Scan Project, *From Schoolhouse to Statehouse*, uses a different, earlier set of interviews to outline the structural and strategic concerns confronting the growing population of grassroots groups entering the school reform arena.[3]

Together these studies replace the familiar snapshot frame with an open exposure, wide angle examination of three or four critical years of a process that some think will

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[2] Mediratta, Kavitha, Norm Fruchter, et al; *Mapping the Field of Organizing for School Improvement: A report on education organizing in Baltimore, Chicago, Los Angeles, the Mississippi Delta, New York City, Philadelphia, San Francisco and Washington D.C.*; Institute for Education and Social Policy; New York; 2002.

[3] Kamber, Thomas; *From Schoolhouse to Statehouse: Community Organizing for Public School Reform*; National Center for Schools and Communities; New York; 2002.

become the next phase in the civil rights movement. That the recommendations of three reports resulting from distinct datasets, perspectives, timelines, and project designs overlap in areas such as the need for infrastructure, different funding models, and capacity building will, we hope, both accelerate and multiply the conversations among grassroots school reform activists and those who control the resources they require.

We found the interviews on which this study is based to be fascinating and often moving. We hope that this report provides information and inspiration that in some small way helps move forward the agenda of creating public schools that serve all children well no matter where they live.

METHODS AND ORGANIZATION OF REPORT

Data Collection and Analysis

We interviewed representatives of 51 organizations across the United States from late July 2001 to early March 2002. The criteria used in assembling this non-random sample included geographic spread, a range of affiliations (networks), and a variety of constituencies. We note that we were unsuccessful in securing any interviews in the Northwest. We assured respondents that they would not be directly identified with their comments.

In interviews that ranged roughly from 45 to 90 minutes, we conducted structured conversations using an interview guide of 27 questions (see Appendix C). We then interrogated the input from 52 interviews[4] through a structured content analysis that examined a number of issues by grouping responses to various subsets of questions. Sorting within questions generated the ideas that informed category development. Unless otherwise noted, all percentages are based on N= 51.

Organization of Report

The report is organized in five parts. Part one is the introduction. Part two is the methodology. Part three identifies the survey respondents and part four presents the findings. Part five discusses findings, and part six draws conclusions and provides recommendations. The appendices contain lists of participating organizations, key variables, and survey questions.

SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Table 1 describes the organizations participating in the study in terms of geography, network affiliation, and special interests within education organizing. Over a third of organizations (18) belong to networks which we would identify as very tightly organized, but roughly two thirds are associated with one or more networks which range from the very tightly organized to loose information-sharing and technical assistance arrangements.

---

[4] One organization contributed two interviews, which were combined in to non-duplicative entries for that organization. The basic unit of analysis is the group, although terms relating to the person responding for the group (e.g., respondent) are used interchangeably throughout.

Table 2 describes the characteristics of the individual respondents. With a handful of exceptions, respondents were generally paid staff, although in some organizations they also perform leadership functions. Nearly two-thirds have or have had children or grandchildren in public schools. A third have been working on school related issues for ten or more years, nearly half for five or fewer years.

Table 1. Characteristics of Participating Groups

Groups by Region	N	Groups by Metro Concentration	N	Groups by Network Affiliation**	N	Groups by Special Focus	N
Northeast*	16	Metro NYC	7	ACORN	4	Native Americans	1
South	11	Bay Area	5	CCC	7	Rural	3
Southwest	3	Los Angeles	3	DART	3	Special Education	3
Midwest	10	Chicago	4	ERASE	12	Testing	1
West	3	Washington D.C.	1	GAMALIEL	2	Youth	2
California	8			IAF	2	Facilities	1
				NTIC	4		
				PEN	2		
				PICO	5		

*Includes Washington D.C.
**Includes multiple affiliations.

Table 2. Characteristics of Individual Respondents

Characteristic	Number (%)
Gender	
Female	29 (57%)
Male	22 (43%)
Ethnicity*	
White, Non-Hispanic	29 (58%)
African American	11 (22%)
Hispanic	5 (10%)
Asian/Pacific Island	3 (6%)
Native American	2 (4%)
Children in Public School	
Ever had children in public school	32 (63%)
Never had children in public school	19 (37%)
Length of time working on school issues	
1 through 5 years	25 (49%)
6 through 9 years	9 (18%)
10 through 30 years	17 (33%)

*One respondent did not give his/her ethnicity.

FINDINGS

Organizational Priorities

This section presents findings from questions addressing responding groups' past and present education-related organizational priorities (questions 1-4), their sense of what resources local schools do and do not have (question 8), other factors that have a positive or negative impact on schools (question 12), information groups consider essential for negotiations (question 13), and the "most important thing parents need to understand about their schools" (question 27).

Our analysis identified 25 *categories* or variables suitable for inter group comparisons.[5] We then ranked the categories according to three possible *function(s)* they might serve for the groups' organizing work: issue, information or capacity building need, or context. Any category of concern might represent an *issue* for a group, an area for which a group needs *information and/or capacity building*, or a broad theme or *context* that shapes a group's analysis or drives the decision-making arena in which they compete.

"There's still a lot of talk and argument around what is best practice, or even what just plain works. So it ends up being about what we can win instead of what is going to make the biggest difference. It miffs me that we are still confused as to what makes the biggest difference, or is there a better question to ask?"

For purposes of this discussion, an *issue* is a problem that people understand as being susceptible to policy change and around which they are willing to organize. Therefore, we count as issues not only problems on which respondents say their groups are working or about to work, but also concerns raised in their other comments that appear sufficiently concrete and important to motivate community action.

In organizing for school reform, *information needs and capacity building needs* overlap to such an extent that further subdividing them seems unhelpful. Furthermore, topics can serve more than one function. For example, equity ranks very high as a frequently mentioned organizing priority but is also one of the most commonly mentioned areas in which groups need documentation.

---

[5] In some cases these categories are quite broad. We recommend, therefore, that when in doubt the reader check the code definitions in the appendix; the fact that some categories encompass more individual concerns than others may influence the frequency with which we tally them.

Context refers to an overarching theme, situation, or dynamic that explains the reality of local schools, influences policy makers' decisions, or informs a group's approach to the issues.

Although this process depends on art as much as science, it nevertheless allows us to draw out both themes and individual points of interest from this lode of material.

The Issues

The 52 interviews we conducted describe a range of problems in American public schools that community organizations are fighting to correct. Our interviews and subsequent content analysis began by looking for both shared and more idiosyncratic organizing priorities of the 51 groups[6] that participated in the study and for ways in which we and other policy resources might support schools-related organizing.

> *"A story that illustrates the power structure of schools is about one of the first graduates from [the organization's] parent leadership development institute. In the institute, she found out what was supposed to be happening in bilingual education for her son. She began to advocate for her son when she found out he wasn't learning English. At the time she started advocating, she was also a non-teaching employee of the school. The school's solution to her child's failure to learn English was to put him into special ed. The school threatened to fire her from her job at the school if she didn't sign her son into special ed. The causes behind problems like these are racism, classism, and entrenched opposition to change."*

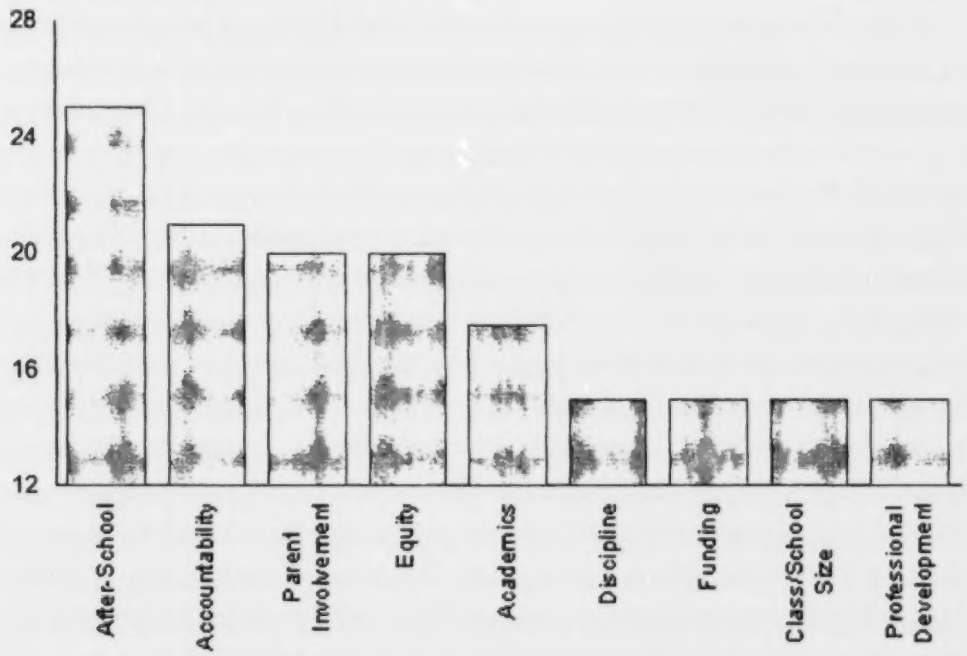
Chart 1 displays the frequency with which respondents identify topics as an organization issue. Nine issue areas show up in roughly 30 to 50 percent of our surveyed groups. Nearly half the groups are concerned with increasing *after-school and enrichment opportunities* in their schools. Next, we find a cluster of three items: *accountability issues at the school, district, and political level*; *parent and community involvement* (including school governance) *and broadening the role of the school in the community* (e.g., community schools); and *equity issues*, generally based on race but also including references to geographic discrimination (rural/urban) or special needs issues.

> *It would be great if parents could really trust that schools were there to educate and care for their children. Until that happens, we're just at war.*

[6] The basic unit of analysis in this discussion is the group. One group contributed two interviews. The answers were coded into a single set of non-duplicating totals for that group. We did not include two or three additional interviews with groups that have completely downgraded a former involvement with education issues.

Issues related to *academics* (see definition) come up for one in three respondents. About 30 percent of the interviews mention notions grouped under four categories: *discipline, funding, class and school size*, and *professional development.* Two more educator-related issues follow.

Chart 1. Frequency of Organization Issue



Eleven groups mention issues related to students with *special needs.* Half a dozen of these raise concerns related to special education—sometimes about budgets, sometimes about services students are not receiving. Six express interests related to the needs of bilingual or non-English speaking students. Four of the latter organizations focus on Latino students. One raises the issue in terms of schools' obligations to address diversity, and one mentions his city's concentration of Bosnian students.

> *The root of the problem is that there is a lack of caring for kids with special needs. Nobody wants to be responsible for providing the access that everyone says the kids should be getting.*

Some issues coded as "other" include: transportation (three groups); the need for school social workers and psychologists, technology and computers; and technical assistance related to the start up of schools for which groups have won commitments.

One of a Kind

Various groups have bilingual education on their agenda, but only one makes the interesting leap of suggesting that English language learners' education should not be put on hold while they study English. *"We need advanced courses in inner city schools and ways for bilingual students to access them...[we need] resources to update and advance the curriculum."*

One organization is working with a national legal services support center to develop a Bill of Rights for Students.

Notable for Their Absence

Girls are not to be seen nor heard. No interview defined issues, information needs, or context in terms of female students; e.g., girls and math or sports equity.

Youth voice is virtually absent from the responses. Two groups raise explicitly youth related issues; one of these and a third suggest a commitment to youth as a constituency in their work. A fourth expressed the need for more youth input into school policy. Interestingly, these groups had very little else in common in terms of geography, constituency, and approach.

Despite the dominance of charter schools and vouchers in much of the national coverage of school reform debates, we find only one city where privatization makes the list of issues and just two groups with any interest in information about privatization issues (charter schools and contracting out school management).

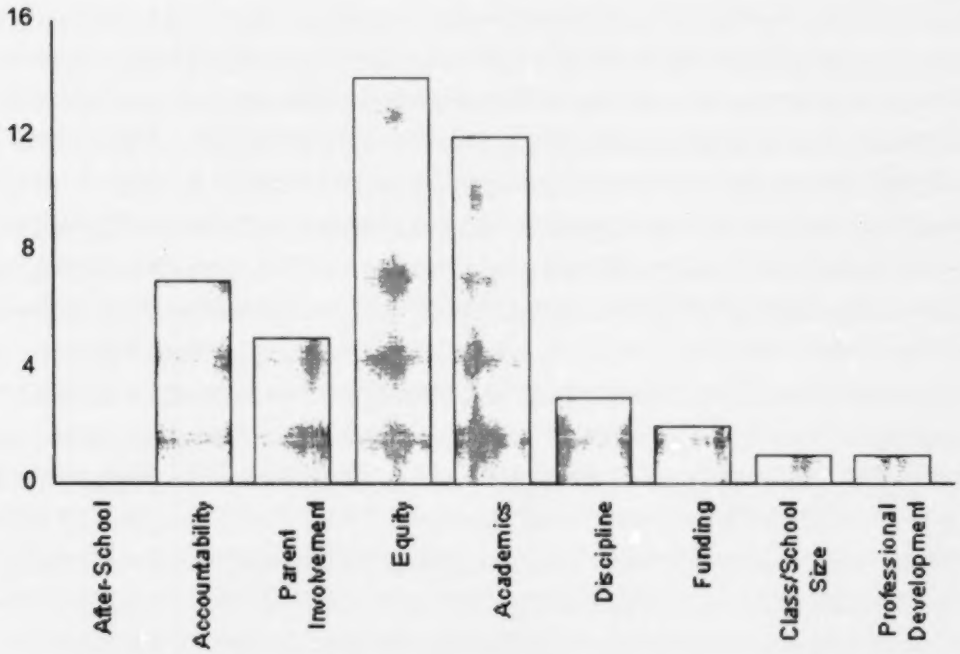
Information and Capacity Building Needs

> *[This is] a data phobic town, a data phobic school system.*

Chart 2 displays the frequency with which respondents identify topics as organizational needs. With one exception, information and capacity building needs were less concentrated than issues more evenly spread across 20 categories. Nearly half the respondents (49 percent) express a need for school-specific and comparative data. As one woman put it, *"People almost fell over when we flyered with test scores."* Her counterpart across the country said, *"The context is not as useful without the hard data."*

Various people mention a preference for data being compared along *"like with like"* dimensions; e.g., low-income rural schools with similar schools, not with upscale suburban schools. Clearly, this approach is relevant to exploring best practices and successful school turnaround strategies.

Chart 2. Frequency of Information Need



From an equity perspective, however, the comparison of schools on opposite sides of the tracks may make the point a group needs. The second most frequently coded information/capacity building need (27.5 percent) is for the information needed to organize around equity concerns, i.e., "raced" data that breaks out race, ethnicity, and language as well as gender and special needs status (special education, bilingual). For example, one organizer emphasizes that obtaining comparative data on Latino students has been a problem for her organization. Another points out that appropriate data breakouts are not just a problem in official data:

> *We have discovered... that school reform literature is not as inclusive as we would like. A lot of the school reform papers and studies do not address the range of diversity we encounter...*

The third most frequently cited information/capacity building need relates to information about academic programming (23.5 percent).

"Other" information or capacity building needs include: political profiles of targets, mapped data, social capital numbers, structured information on charter schools, and a *"history of why the schools are the way they are."*

Issues and Perceived Needs Are Not Always in Synch

The percentage of respondents who think testing is a problem is well over four times greater than the percentage interested in alternative assessment that might replace testing.

Organizations express interest in a number of relatively complex issues but frequently demonstrate no concern for obtaining additional information or building capacity related to those issues. For example, the most frequently cited category of issues revolves around after-school and enrichment activities, but no one mentions needing additional information. Perhaps the value of some educational components may be obvious and, arguably, parents may not require technical assistance to recognize valuable programming and services.

> *I have great faith in our educators to do the job for our kids if they just had the resources...the decisions in education have become way too bureaucratic... until we get this funding thing figured out, all these other issues about content are superfluous...*

Other educational policy options, however, are not necessarily intuitive. Interviews with at least 15 groups show school funding as an issue, but only two people express a need for information about how education funding—usually a complicated process—actually functions. Note, however that male respondents are statistically more likely to be interested in receiving information about distribution of resources.

Fifteen organizations (not necessarily the same ones) also see professional development as an issue, but in the more open-ended questions only one respondent expresses interest in knowing more about it. Respondents who have ever had children in school, however, are statistically more likely to be interested in information about professional development when specifically asked about its usefulness to their organizing.

The ratio of groups working on or interested in special needs (special education, language, or services for children with disabilities) as an issue to groups wanting information in this area was over ten to one.[7]

Context

Fewer categories seem useful for defining context than are applicable to issues and information and capacity building needs. Moreover, groups are less concentrated in a few top categories. Roughly half of the designated categories are coded as providing a

[7] One possible explanation for this particular disparity is that the topics subsumed under special needs are ones for which parents and their organizations have to build an information and capacity base even to begin organizing around the issues.

context or backdrop for schools related organizing. Economics (economic and community development, poverty, employment) comes up most frequently (31 percent of groups).

> *Corporations own 51 percent of the land and 76 percent of the minerals [in our state], but pay only 16 percent of the property taxes...Parents are sick of selling hotdogs and paying taxes when the people with the wealth aren't paying their fair share... District architectural contracts in 47 of 55 counties go to one firm that paid the country club dues of the state school superintendent.*

In nearly 20 percent of the groups, notions of parent and wider community involvement with the schools provide the connecting tissue. Racism is identifiable in about 14 percent of the groups as a underlying issue that informs their perspective.

The "other" category for context encompasses several interesting topics: police brutality as a dominant factor in their school-related organizing; the need to *"absorb the history and herstory of the community into the schools;" "too much involvement of politicians in schools;"* from an organization of parents of children with learning disabilities: *"misinformation from school officials;"* homelessness and the accompanying transportation and mobility issues; the *"challenges facing low-income families."*

Although embedded in a crowded category (academics), expectations surfaces as an important contextual theme. Respondents repeatedly report that expectations of student performance and potential are low. When asked what other factors, in addition to safety and facilities, determine school quality, 15 out of the 51 respondents cite administrators' and teachers' expectations of student ability as critical to children's success in school. Further, many say that in low and moderate-income neighborhoods, administrators are loath to invest resources because they have low expectations for student achievement. In particular, there are variations in the way children of color are perceived compared to white children:

> *The mostly white schools, or schools with a higher percentage of white students, have more resources and place many more kids in college.*
>
> *When kids get together in recreation areas, if they are black they are called gangs, if they are white they are "just playing."*

Usefulness and Relevance

We also asked people specific questions about the usefulness of several types of information that might arguably be relevant to organizing for school reform (see questions 14-25). The responses were coded "very useful", "useful", "slightly useful" and not useful". The findings are presented in Table 4.

A strong majority of the respondents (42) said they would find information on at least six of 11 of topics useful or very useful, with roughly half of all groups (26) indicating an interest in at least nine of the topics. Ninety-two percent of respondents feel that data comparing schools on issues such as test scores, resources, and safety would be useful or very useful. (This resonates strongly with the less prompted interest in school-specific comparative data identified in about half the interviews; see Table 3.) The spread in the percentage of organizations that find the next seven items useful or very useful is negligible. When we look at topics which are considered very useful, however, three stand out: neighborhood school budgets, school specific information, and district budgets at 69 percent, 65 percent, and 61 percent, respectively.

> *The whole budget is available, but...have you ever seen that thing? Even if you know the budget code you'll spend the rest of your life breaking it down—this is like Enron.*

Table 3. Usefulness of Information

Category	Number (%) Responding Very Useful	Number (%) Responding Useful	Number (%) Responding Slightly/ Not Useful
Understanding budget for neighborhood schools	35 (69%)	5 (10%)	11 (21%)
Information about your school compared to others	33 (67%)	12 (23%)	4 (8%)
School district budget	31 (61%)	12 (23%)	8 (16%)
Best practices in other schools in your district	28 (56%)	13 (26%)	9 (18%)
Decision making processes regarding repairs/renovations	24 (48%)	10 (20%)	16 (32%)
Teacher hiring/assigning practices	23 (49%)	15 (32%)	9 (19%)
Teacher professional development programs	22 (44%)	17 (34%)	11 (22%)
Standardized testing	22 (45%)	13 (26%)	14 (29%)
Best practices in other schools in your state	19 (39%)	20 (41%)	10 (20%)
Reading and math teaching programs in your schools	19 (37%)	13 (26%)	19 (37%)
Best practices in other parts of the country	18 (37%)	24 (49%)	7 (14%)
Programs and regulations to ensure parent involvement	18 (37%)	16 (33%)	15 (30%)

Internet Needs

Question 26 asked respondents what information about schools and education reform they would like to be able to find easily on the Internet. Table 4 presents respondents' level of interest in what can be found on the Internet currently, and information that they would like to be able to find on the Internet.

Many parents believe that the Internet provides information that is not accessible in other ways. Respondents feel that they can keep the public posted and provide information over the Internet that normally would be kept from the public eye. Our

own experience in constructing datasets for local organizations is that the school level information available on line from *state* departments of education web sites is frequently more useful than information available from individual districts. Accurate and timely information allows everyone to stay more in tune with the daily workings of the school district.

> *The Internet can be used to fill parents in on what they don't know. They don't know what makes a teacher a good teacher for their child. Your child is sent to Ms. Jones' class, and only the school knows that last year only three children passed the reading test with Ms. Jones. [School administrators] don't share that information with parents.*

Respondents feel that best practices of other districts (41 percent), information on local districts such as staff contracts, ongoing administration policy and school profiles (18 percent) and recent data concerning student behavior such as drop outs, suspensions and discipline (16 percent) would be the most helpful if placed on the internet.

Not only can the Internet keep parents aware and involved, the Internet can also keep educators, administrators, communities, and organizations involved. Also, parents can compare their districts with others and begin to understand problems that occur in many locations in a national context. Most groups (41 percent) feel the need for on-line access to information about best practices of other school districts. This would provide parents and their allies a chance to home in on what policies might work in their districts. They can also use such information to motivate districts with evidence that there are workable alternatives to unsuccessful practices in their own jurisdiction.

> *[We want to know] what has worked in urban areas and how people went about making these changes. Major challenges that other districts are addressing and what some of their major successes are.*
>
> *It would be important to see what other folks have done and how we can replicate successful organizing if their solution applies to us.*
>
> *What's working in other districts, districts that have similar problems, sizes and demographics.*

Profiles of administrators, information on school boards, e-mail addresses, and locations where educators and administrators work would also be helpful for parents. According to one interview: "Public servants need to be available to everybody and access to them needs to be provided."

Table 4. Information Respondents Would Like to Find on the Web

Category of Response	Number (%) Giving This Response
Best practices from other districts	21 (41%)
All of the information from questions 14-25	12 (24%)
Parents do not have access to the Internet	10 (20%)
Local District Information	9 (18%)
Data on Student Behavior	8 (16%)
Parent Issues Concerning Administration	7 (14%)
Teacher/Administration Qualifications	7 (14%)
Standardized Test Results	6 (12%)
Budget Reports	3 (6%)

Existing Internet Resources

Standardized test information is already available on the Internet in many states. That 12 percent of the respondents expressed interest in its availability suggests that there are still places where such data are not accessible or not easily found. The information needs to be compiled into a universal user-friendly format in order to better benefit the public. A more adaptable search engine might be necessary as well to make finding information on state and local websites easier.

> *Sometimes it seems like there's too much information. [We need] something to help sift through all the stuff, a user-friendly guide and information about how to get the information.*
>
> *I'd like to see students be able to understand it all and possibly putting it all in Spanish. This information needs to be very basic and very focused.*
>
> *Sometimes you don't know if you're comparing apples to oranges. [We] need more information about what the data is and how to use it. We don't always know what is comparable.*

Our interviews suggest that many parents and even their organizations still lack access to the Internet (20 percent) and parents that do have access do not know where to look for school related information. However, no group specifically raised Internet skills as an area for capacity building. One group in Mississippi actually provides a computer and Internet access for one parent leader in each of various small towns around the state; the host for the computer has to agree to allow other parents to use the computer, too.

The Personal as Political

We looked for significant differences in ratings of importance of issue, in information needs, and subtext across respondents' characteristics.

Respondents who have been organizers around school issues for over 10 years compared to those who have been organizers for 5 or fewer years:

- More likely to want strategic information.
- More likely to think professional development is a major issue.
- More likely to want information about teacher professional development programs.
- More likely to want information about understanding the school budget in the neighborhood.
- More likely to want information about understanding the school budget in the district.

Compared to their colleagues with five or fewer years organizing around school reform, organizers with more than ten years' experience are more likely to understand professional development as a central concern, to have an interest in budgets, and to want *strategic* as opposed to tactical information. People who have been organizing around school reform longer are also more likely to have or have had children in the public schools. See box at left.

People who have ever had children in public schools are more likely to focus on even more nitty-gritty content-related topics: math and reading programs, professional development for teachers, best practices in their neighborhoods and state. They are likely to think schools are less safe and (therefore?) less likely to think security measures in the schools are inappropriate. See box below.

Respondents who have ever had children in public school

- Compared with other respondents, think schools are less safe.
- Less likely to think that there is excessive/inappropriate security in schools.
- Less likely to think that schools do not care about children.
- More likely to think academics is a major issue.
- More likely to want information about teacher professional development.
- More likely to want information about the reading and math teaching programs in their schools.
- More likely to want information on best practices in other schools in their neighborhoods.
- More likely to want information on best practices in other parts of the state.

Gender based differences are more varied. One that may have implications for approaches to organizing is that women respondents are more likely to report that

parents' own negative experiences in school have affected both their attitude toward their kids' school and their parent involvement. See box below.

Gender Based Differences

- Women are more likely to report that schools contain toxins, making the facilities unsafe.
- Women are more likely to report that constituents' negative experience of their own schooling affected their attitude towards their children's school and parent involvement.
- Women are more likely to want information on the decision-making process regarding school building repairs and renovations.
- Men are more likely to be interested in receiving information about distribution of resources.
- Men are more likely to think that parents do not have access to the Internet.

Race

A number of our categories collect issues that, in terms of the realities of organizing around schools, frequently touch on elements of racism, race consciousness, or both. Forty-five percent of respondents express an interest in issues from at least one of the equity, lockdown, or race categories. If we add in the unduplicated references to the category of special needs, an area in which race is potentially relevant, race issues take the lead at 53 percent.

People of color—African Americans, Asians, and Latinos—whom we interviewed are statistically more likely to see racism as a unifying context for school issues and more likely to think school discipline is a major issue. They are more likely to think that schools do not respect parents. They are more likely to think that school authorities' disrespectful treatment of students contributes to unsafe conditions in the school.

Non-white respondents are also more likely to be interested in concrete details of the schools where they organize: specifically, reading and math programs and best practices from other schools in their states and other areas of the country.

In addition, people of color in our survey were:

- More likely to think administration's reckless/irresponsible behavior contributes to unsafe conditions in schools.
- More likely to think that school authorities' disrespectful treatment of students contributes to unsafe conditions in schools.
- More likely to think that schools do not respect parents.
- More likely to think that schools have low expectations of children.

- More likely to think school discipline is a major issue.
- More likely to see racism as a subtext in school issues.
- More likely to want information on the reading and math teaching programs in their schools.
- More likely to want information on best practices in other schools in the state.

Four groups are concerned with issues we combine under the heading of lockdown to distinguish them from discipline-related concerns. All these groups work primarily with parents and students of color. It is difficult to imagine their issues occurring in a school attended mostly by Anglo students:

> *Police bringing police dogs into our schools is still a major issue. We've fought it off in many places, but it is still happening. [This and other issues] lead to high drop out rate, low esteem of the students and segregation in our schools.*
>
> *[The juvenile crime program] allows the police to come into the school and arrest children who commit minor crimes on school property. The legislation passed three or four years ago, and we've been organizing against it ever since...The police talk about this [very high] arrest rate as an impressive thing, but they don't explain that the reason the rate is so high is because they are arresting children...They even handcuff kids inside the school in front of teachers and kids.*

A young organizer who works with primarily Latino students in another city reports that his members are being expelled for, "wearing a shirt with the Virgin Mary on the back because [school authorities say] it's gang related...a lot of things that are cultural to us are gang-related to the schools." In a district that is strapped for cash, his group finds itself having to organize against a budget appropriation to arm each school security guard with a shotgun and a taser.

Parent Involvement and the School Climate

> *[There is] tremendous ideology among educators that it's the fault of the parents; they don't realize what parents do to even walk into the school. They've been totally disrespected, or they go to a parent-teacher conference and there's no one to translate. More open parents ask for a translator but it still doesn't happen. There are too many schools where parents feel unwelcome by staff. There are too many authoritarian principals.*

This section identifies respondents' level of interest in parent/community involvement, their perceptions of the type and degree of parental involvement among their constituents, and the local schools' climate for parent and student inclusion in decision-

making. The analysis is based on responses to questions 7, 11 and 27 of the survey. We also looked at responses to questions 1, 2 and 3 for this section.

Parents started many of the organizations surveyed. The majority (58 percent) of respondents make some reference to parent involvement in their remarks. Respondents are aware of a continuum of parent and community involvement in schools: starting with the provision of a safe and caring home environment, to encouraging children's learning, to attending school events and volunteering, to advocating for school improvements, to membership in advisory committees, and, ultimately, to participation in school governance.

> *We're trying to get parents to understand that involvement can be as simple as helping their kids academically at home, to being part of the school site council and being involved in advocating for the school.*

However, most organizations (80 percent) engage in activities to raise parents' consciousness and increase their power (55 percent) to a point where they can become advocates for change and partners in school governance:

> *They are our schools. We are responsible for them. When the schools fail, the community fails. We need a sense of ownership.*
>
> *Traditionally, the district sees [only] limited ways for parents to be involved, such as they are always happy to have parents volunteering and fundraising. We are looking to frame parent involvement in a different way.*

The majority of respondents (53 percent) indicate that parent involvement is low in their communities. Only six percent suggest that local parent involvement is high, and 41 percent see varying levels of parent involvement in their communities, depending on factors such as parent availability and school climate.

Roadblocks to Parent Involvement

Survey respondents identify many factors working together to impede parent involvement. Those concerning parents are identified in Table 5 and those concerning school climate are identified in Table 6.

Respondents whose constituency is predominantly poor see how poverty and poor education work to prevent parent involvement. For instance, many parents are overwhelmed by the task of making a living—in city after city, people mentioned parents working two and even three jobs. Parents feel they do not have the capacity to take an active part in their children's education:

> *Working two jobs and not being able to come to schools. Not knowing what to ask. Coming from another culture. Having had a painful*

educational experience themselves. And, sometimes, being shut out of school itself.

Traditional PTAs don't appeal to people from places where the teacher is God.

Despite the body of research documenting the positive impact of parent involvement on children's academic outcomes[8], school administrators routinely add to parents' sense of powerless by giving off very negative messages:

To a large extent parents get the message that they are persona non grata in the schools.

Young people will straight up tell you that teachers don't care. It's just a paycheck for them.

Table 5. Parent Factors Impeding Parent Involvement

Factor	Number (%) of Sites Reporting Factor
Parents are working two or more jobs	19 (38%)
Parents speak a language other than English	15 (29%)
Parents feel powerless	11 (22%)
Parents come from a different culture	10 (20%)
Parents had negative experiences in school	5 (10%)
Parents have poor or little education	4 (8%)
Parents/children think teachers do not care about them	3 (6%)
Parents/children think the administration does not care about them	3 (6%)

Parents are discouraged from going to PTA meetings. The staff expects them to raise money and help with class trips, but they aren't allowed to critique the way things are done. It's not a very positive outlet for parents.

The power for the public schools is so top down that people have just given up...the board will do what they want to do...the CEO will do what he wants to do...people have just kind of given up.

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[8] Comer, J.P., "Educating Poor Minority Children," *Scientific American*, 259 (1988), 42-48. Freiburg, H.J., "A School that Fosters Resilience in Inner-City Youth," *Journal of Negro Education*, 62 (1993), 364-376. Marockie, H, & Jones, H.L., "Reducing Dropout Rates Through Home-School Communication," *Education and Urban Society*, 19 (1987), 200-205.

Table 6. School Climate Factors Impeding Parent Involvement

Factor	Number (%) of Sites Reporting Factor
School/administration is generally unwelcoming	23 (46%)
Higher levels of involvement are undermined	20 (40%)
School is a poor communicator	17 (34%)
School personnel do not respect parents/children	17 (34%)
School has low expectations of children	12 (24%)
Parent involvement not high on principal's agenda	12 (24%)
Race/class insensitivity	10 (20%)
Racial/cultural difference between school staff and parents	10 (20%)
Lack of training of school staff	5 (10%)
Teachers/school staff are overwhelmed	3 (6%)

Factors Encouraging Parent Involvement

Although most respondents only report roadblocks to parent involvement, some describe schools that attempt to draw parents into a home/school partnership. Table 7 lists the factors encouraging parent involvement most frequently mentioned by respondents. The school principal is seen as a kingpin in the encouragement of parent involvement, and good communication and training of all stakeholders further promote the process:

> *[It] has to do with the strength of principal leadership and the way school chooses to receive them [parents].*
>
> *The core reality in poor areas is that you have lines [of] racial and class differences with little training for teachers in how to cross those lines successfully. Where there is good training for teachers on these issues, there are greater involvement and better outcomes.*
>
> *What we've done at the parent involvement level is partner with "Telling Stories" Project. Share stories, make a quilt. Weave in getting to know the school better, know kids better. One school now has 70 members in the parent teacher association and is moving to workshops on standards and assessments, asking how to have a good parent conference...Then parents called head of facilities to come to a meeting. Those parents have gotten to a level of efficacy where I as a [more middle class] parent started. Now, they're telling the head of facilities to fix up the school.*

Table 7. Factors Encouraging Parent Involvement

Factor	Number (%) of Sites Reporting Factor
Positive attitude toward involvement from school leadership	10 (20%)
Good communication between school and home	8 (16%)
Good relationship between teachers/teachers' union and parents	6 (12%)
Training/organizing parents	6 (12%)
Small schools/communities	3 (6%)
Training school staff in parent involvement	2 (4%)

Thoughts on Promoting Parent Involvement

Several questions in the survey elicit responses about the 'how to' of parent involvement. The most frequently mentioned ways in which organizations think they, the school, or the organization and the school working together could promote parent involvement are listed in Table 8. The final question in our survey asks organizations what they think is the most important thing parents and their allies in the community need to understand about the schools in the neighborhoods where the organization works. Increasing parent awareness of their ability and responsibility to effect change is among the most frequently recurring themes. Here is a selection of the responses:

> *Accountability is important and that accountability has some responsibility, and that means we have to do it. If we work at it hard enough, we'll be successful and that translates into more successful young people coming out.*
>
> *Parents and community members are in a strong position to influence what happens in schools. I think the reason why schools are the way they are is because parents don't feel they have a voice or a place to share their views and visions.*
>
> *That they belong to them. Just like the children in the community are our children. That there's a public, community responsibility to ensure that they're receiving a quality education. As the schools go, there go our neighborhoods.*
>
> *Need to understand about power. How are decisions made? Who has power? How do you get power? How do you use it? Our ability to implement any kind of change is based on our ability to bring together numbers of people who can hold them accountable. It's not primarily because we have good information (although we do, it helps). Information doesn't replace power. It only supplements it.*
>
> *That they can make a difference.*

Three organizations suggest family centers as information conduits for parents. Four organizations recommend opening up schools to communities and thereby facilitating relationships among education stakeholders, as well as providing important capacity building opportunities for parents. Four organizations describe teacher home visits as being instrumental in creating important home/school linkages.

Table 8. Ways to Promote Parent Involvement

What Should Be Done	Number (%) Making Suggestion
Parent consciousness raising/power building	41 (80%)
Get information to parents	28 (57%)
Organize parents	27 (55%)
Promote relationships among parents/children/teachers/schools/communities	12 (24%)

Most respondents perceive clearly that the roadblocks to parent involvement encountered by low-income parents are more frequent and diverse than those encountered by their more affluent constituents. However, even in a high-income suburb, whose well-educated residents consider themselves full partners with local schoolteachers, the principal, and the district superintendent along the continuum of parental involvement, parents encounter a brick wall when it comes to talking to the state Department of Education.

Teacher Quality

Surveyed groups frequently cited quality of teacher resources and professional development as top issues, but respondents also frequently cited roadblocks to organizing around them. This section explores perceptions of teacher and principal quality as well as how groups view community participation in improving and monitoring teacher and principal quality. The findings are from responses to survey questions 9 and 10.

Views on Local Obstacles to Attaining and Retaining Quality Educators

Quality and distribution of teaching resources tie for tenth out of the 24 most frequently cited issues among groups. Thirty-one of the 51 groups (61 percent) cite a specific roadblock—either within or outside the control of school administrators—to staffing their local public schools with quality teachers. The most commonly-cited issue with administrators (13 of 51 respondents, 25 percent) is that more experienced and better qualified teachers are placed in higher-performing and/or more affluent schools, while teachers who hold emergency credentials or who are teaching outside their license or subject area are disproportionately placed in poorer and/or lower-performing schools.

Among factors beyond administrators' control, the most commonly cited (25 percent) are teacher shortages and a small applicant pool.

There's a pattern that more affluent areas have more talented people to choose from, and a bigger pool of applicants, so it is easier to make decisions and retain teachers and administrators.

Professional development is the sixth most frequently cited issue that groups organize around. Nearly a third of the groups that mention the impact of teacher training and professional development on the quality of teachers cite a negative impact from inadequate or misguided evaluation and staff development in their local schools.

> *[Professional development is] insufficient. It is often "drive by" development—the one shot deal that rarely changes practice.*

Familiarity with Hiring and Training Processes

In addition to ranking tenth among issues groups organize around, teacher quality ranks ninth among issues about which they want more information. Thirty-eight out of all 51 groups (74.5 percent) say information on hiring and training processes would be either useful or very useful to their work. Nine groups (18%) cite a specific school-imposed impediment to their participation in selecting teachers, such as opaque hiring processes or ignoring parental inquiries. Of the 30 groups that indicate whether or not they know about local teacher hiring processes, 20 report having at least a general sense of the process. For the 19 groups that indicate whether or not they know about principal hiring, 15 do; for professional development, the equivalent figures are 22 out of 25.

Interviews from nine groups suggest that school districts deliberately place obstacles to community participation in the hiring and training process. Examples include lack of response by officials to parental inquiries and opaque hiring processes.

> *We are making demands for change that have the parents' interest at heart, and these schools go on the defensive. Parents often voice the feeling that no one wants them to be involved.*
>
> *The superintendent has been bypassing the community involvement process for teacher hiring.*

Table 9. Community Understanding of Hiring/Training Processes

Process	Number (%) Indicating a General Sense of the Process	Number (%) Indicating a General Lack of Knowledge
Teacher Hiring	20 (39%)	10 (20%)
Teacher Training	22 (43%)	3 (6%)
Principal Hiring	15 (29%)	4 (8%)

School Safety and School Facilities

This section of our report seeks to identify what factors respondents believe contribute to or cause unsafe conditions in their children's schools, and what factors determine the state of school facilities and school quality in the neighborhoods they live in. The findings are from responses to survey questions 5 and 6.

School Safety

School safety, or the lack of it is of concern to parents and education organizers nationwide. When asked to report on whether or not their schools are safe, 31 percent of respondents describe the schools where they organize as unsafe. Sixteen percent of all the people interviewed state that safety is a major focus of their organizing work. While different participants give different opinions of what makes a school safe or unsafe, the responses suggest that education organizers and parents from California clear across to West Virginia have shared concerns and are fighting for similar changes to deal with the safety needs in their children's schools.

Table 10. Reasons Schools Are Unsafe

Reason	Number (%) Reporting Reason
Unfair or disrespectful treatment of students	17 (33%)
Excessive/inappropriate security	13 (26%)
Gang activity	12 (24%)
Irresponsible administration	10 (20%)
Neighborhood	8 (16%)
Overcrowded	7 (14%)
Drugs	6 (12%)
Old/dilapidated buildings	5 (10%)
Traffic in school area	5 (10%)
Asbestos/lead/other toxins	4 (8%)
Other	3 (6%)

The factors respondents name that shape the school safety climate are varied (see Table 10). When asked a follow-up question—What contributes to making the schools safe or unsafe?—even more people had opinions. For example, 33 percent say that unfair or disrespectful treatment of students will contribute to making a school unsafe. Examples of unfair or disrespectful treatment range from teachers' and administrators' low expectations of students, to the spending of resources on security instead of classroom instruction and educational programs. Twenty-five percent surveyed cite what they feel to be excessive or inappropriate security, such as policies to install metal detectors, additional security, and even to station police officers in public schools. Respondents voice their concerns in terms such as these:

We were having some drug problems in the area of the school. The administration's response was overzealous security[in the school].

School safety is a double-edged sword. We would prefer to see more facilities, more classes and resources rather than school safety measures.

When students are treated right, we don't see violence or vandalism.

Expulsions in our district are disproportionate to the amount of violence we hear about.

Gang activity is the third most mentioned of safety concerns (24 percent of respondents). Gang violence is also one aspect of the impact of the neighborhood on safety, since gang violence in the neighborhood finds its way into the schools. Many of these respondents say that while gangs are a safety concern, there has been a steady decline in the presence of gangs in their schools over the years. Most of those surveyed say their schools in low- to moderate-income areas are safer than the public and the media believe.

Sixteen percent of respondents name "neighborhood" factors as determining the safety of the school. Respondents criticize school administrators and policy makers for trying to create a safe school in a vacuum—without addressing the factors in the neighborhood that create an unsafe environment. Respondents define "neighborhood" factors as social and economic problems that afflict the larger community where children attend school. Any of these—crime, drugs, low levels of community development, and poverty issues that afflict families, such as un- or under employment, limited access to health care, even lack of adequate nutrition—create stressors that interview participants say spill over into the schools.

Many of the families in the districts in which we work face many significant challenges in their lives, from housing and employment to health. The children deal with violence and other significant challenges in their homes and neighborhoods.

Any problem in the school has to be seen as a wider issue—it's an outgrowth of the same problem in the larger neighborhood.

The State of Public School Facilities

Our boys told us they had a field trip to the jail and it looked better than the schools.

We asked for people's thoughts about school facilities: How are the school facilities and locations in the neighborhoods where you work and what causes these conditions? The findings are presented in Table 11.

Table 11. Respondents' Observations on School Facilities

Observation	Number (%) Making Observation
Buildings are old/dilapidated	44 (86%)
Political decisions impede repair/construction	20 (39%)
Buildings contain toxins	18 (35%)
Buildings are overcrowded	14 (27%)
Race discrimination impedes upgrade of facilities	10 (20%)
Buildings are behind in technology	9 (18%)
Neighborhood problems impede repair/construction	9 (18%)

An overwhelming portion—86 percent—told us that old and dilapidated buildings are characteristic of the schools in their neighborhoods (see Table 2). Thirty-nine percent said they think that major decisions on resources, repairs, and new construction are made based on politics, not on the needs of the students.

> *Facilities are worse in low-income schools because the kids there are not valued. Our boys told us they had a field trip to the jail and it looked better than the schools.*
>
> *Our schools are under funded by the state. Our school construction policy is very regressive—the county has to pay to build them. So the poorer counties can't build.*
>
> *There are political pressures to spend more in the suburbs. This has gotten much better since our magnet schools lawsuit.*

Other observations are that the schools are contaminated with asbestos or other toxins (35 percent) and are overcrowded (27 percent). Toxins and overcrowding are a safety concern as well as an indication that facilities do not provide a healthy learning environment.

The facilities question, like the safety one, reveals that organizers and parents think policy makers and administrators show little commitment to disadvantaged and minority children and expect little from them. Twenty percent of responding advocates state that racial discrimination is one factor that leads to the inferior conditions found in their schools. Inequity in the distribution of resources and low expectations are two reasons organizers say that not all facilities in all neighborhoods are equal. Says an organizer referring to his mostly Latino neighborhood, "*Our schools are crowded, especially in Latino neighborhoods. There is no political will to invest in these populations.* Another says, *"Facilities are a race and class issue. Poorer neighborhoods get less money."*

An interesting observation was that facilities are inappropriate for modern children:

> *Beyond the overcrowding, children today are bigger today than they were years ago. So the furniture doesn't fit!*

Other Factors That Affect Quality of Education

We also asked people to name any other features in the schools or factors in the neighborhoods that have an impact, good or bad, on school quality (survey question 12). Table 12 presents the findings.

Table 12. Other Factors That Influence School Quality

Factor	Number (%) Citing Factor
Community and business support of schools	24 (47%)
Relationships between schools and parents/kids	24 (47%)
Individual poverty (unemployment, housing, low wages)	22 (43%)
Financial and other resources	21 (41%)
Expectations for student achievement	15 (29%)
Economic/social problems in the neighborhood	14 (27%)
Parent participation	13 (25%)

Survey respondents overwhelmingly repeat, in order of frequency, that the elements of community support of the school, relationships, individual poverty factors, financial and other resources, expectations of student potential, the neighborhood, and parent participation are the determining factors in quality of education (see Table 3). They express frustration that many teachers and administrators do not acknowledge the influence of several of these factors, such as the effect of teacher expectations, and the importance of encouraging parent participation.

Forty-seven percent of participants say strained relationships between parents and teachers as well as between students and teachers are roadblocks to high quality schools. Teachers, they say, may misinterpret a parent's unavailability to meet with the teacher as disinterest, when really the parent is working two jobs to support his or her family. Parents or teachers may avoid communication because they speak two different languages and feel mutually unable to communicate. Teachers may also feel threatened by parent advocates and their demands for accountability.

> *Advocacy is a dirty word in our state.*
>
> *Teachers think that immigrant kids don't matter, that poor kids don't matter.*

Teachers in the communities where school-related organizing is necessary are often overburdened with a large class and minimal resources and as a result may have little time to meet individually with parents, whereupon the parent decides that the teacher "doesn't care" about her child. Not a single respondent suggested there was such a thing as an apathetic parent, only apathetic teachers. Note, however, that those survey participants who have ever had children in public school are, in fact, less likely to feel that teachers do not care about their children.

Connected to the poor relationships between those who teach and those who learn and their parents, respondents report that expectations of student performance and potential are low. Twenty-nine percent cited administrators' and teachers' expectations of student ability as critical to children's success in school. Further, many respondents said that in low and moderate-income neighborhoods, school administrators are loathe to invest resources because of their low expectations for student achievement.[9] Often these low expectations are directed towards children of color:

> *The teachers think, " Why don't you go back to Mexico. You're dumb there, you'll be dumb here."*
>
> *The mostly white schools, or schools with a higher percentage of white students have more resources and place many more kids in college.*
>
> *When kids get together in recreation areas, if they are black they are called gangs, if they are white they are " just playing."*

Greater access to school buildings, increased economic opportunity and community support of the schools are factors that respondents say can all result in higher quality public schools. Forty-seven percent perceive community involvement and business support of the public schools to be a determining factor in school quality. Community development is vital to ensuring the economic well being of the families, yet policymakers often leave it out of any discussion of school improvement.

> *Community development has to be integrated into the education issue. Public will to see people get out of poverty is tied to everything.*
>
> *[We need] city, county and state investment, also job opportunities for kids after school can have an impact.*

---

[9] Rosenthal, R., and Jacobson, L. (1968). *Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectation and Pupils' Intellectual Development.* New York: Rinehart and Winston. This study made an important contribution to the study of expectations and their effect on children's intellectual development. The authors randomly selected 20 percent of a group of students who had taken an intelligence test without any relation to their test results—and told the teachers that they had "unusual potential for intellectual growth." When all the children were retested, the "intelligent" children showed far greater gains than those children who were not singled out for the teachers' attention.

Forty-one percent think that increased resources such as more funds and increased use of school facilities for remedial and adult education activities increase school quality. Rothstein[10] connects this instinctive sense that school facilities represent underutilized options to the subject of equity underlying many of the issues raised in this report. He refers to the need to remedy inequalities in "social capital" for low-income children through various measures including, among others, after school and summer programs:

> *It is the concentration of disadvantage itself that requires the strongest remediation. Schools with intensive poverty require not simply additional resources but disproportionately more than others...Schools that are able to stay open longer, that welcome the neighborhood, that have special programs or functions that benefit the neighborhood...seem to be strong anchors in the community.*

In contrast to Rothstein's prescription, one man observes that improvements in his neighborhood have been directed to the schools that are preparing to welcome an influx of higher-income or whiter residents: " *We've gotten some improvements to our schools to get them ready for gentrification of the neighborhood.* "

Respondents state that housing and family income are two of the major community problems that have a negative impact on quality of education. Lack of stable housing and employment causes families to have to uproot their children from school to seek out a new living and an affordable home:

> *Better wages means a parent not having to keep three jobs. The same is true for better housing and health insurance. If a family is in crisis it affects schools.*
>
> *Single mothers have an effect, because they have less time to spend on their kids. They are temporary workers, a lot of them without benefits. Door knocking reveals that the kids are at home alone. This destroys families.*

Asking parents about safety and facilities, we find the questions elicit responses that spring from central themes. Many respondents believe that student violence is a symptom of other equity-based ills, with the solution lying in increased resources for students, rather than in stricter discipline policies. Factors named as determinants of school safety, such as unfair or disrespectful treatment of students, are also seen as damaging to student performance and damaging to the quality of their education. Organizers display a sophisticated perspective on the interconnectedness of policing, housing, economic development, and employment policies and the quality of schools available in the communities they represent.

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[10] Rothstein, Richard. "Equalizing Education Resources on Behalf of Disadvantaged Children." In *A Notion at Risk*. New York: The Century Foundation Press, 2000.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We hope this report has provided organizers and grassroots leaders who fight for better public schools with a fresh perspective on their work and on what organizing in other places is accomplishing. We also hope our colleagues in other technical assistance and policy advocacy groups have come away with new thoughts on how we can all better support parents, students, and their allies. Finally, we hope that funders who support education reform and civic engagement have found information and viewpoints they can use to refine their funding strategies. With a modest level of coordination and "glue money," these three not always well-coordinated sectors could constitute the infrastructure for educational justice work in this country. We offer the following comments, questions, and suggestions to stimulate a wider conversation and then, we hope, collaboration among the various entities that have taken up the challenge of creating a public education system that succeeds for all our children:

Act national even when our issues are local.

Environmentalists exhort us to think globally, act locally. The structure of public education and the strengths of community organizing ensure that most school reform activity is close to home. On the other hand, when the work of local groups across the country shares themes (racism, national testing), a minimal level of national coordination can help spotlight everyone's local campaign. Can we advance the local organizing by elevating a shared local concern such as lockdown or test boycotts to national scrutiny?

School reform organizing must inevitably confront racism.

A majority of the groups we interviewed refer to race- and racism-related issues, but it is less clear how often they "lead with the race cut" as our colleagues at the Applied Research Center (ARC) say. At the National Center for Schools and Communities, we have assisted several communities that effectively used raced data to demonstrate the inequitable distribution of teaching resources in their schools. The ERASE network of grassroots school reform activists coordinated by ARC has developed tools for collecting evidence of institutional racism. Are community groups sufficiently aggressive about spotlighting the racist dimensions of local school policy?

Incorporate traditional civil rights organizations into the education justice infrastructure.

Before public accommodations, before voter registration, the civil rights movement was about public schools and won many of the legal and other tactical handles which

organizers and advocates have used. However, virtually no organizer with whom we spoke mentioned coalescing with any of the well-known civil rights groups. Ironically, community organizations are much more likely to seek an accommodation with the local teachers union.

Take the time to do it right.

Community organizations that are committed to school reform must figure out how to organize over longer timelines. Groups can win bathroom repairs or a crossing guard with the basic six-week campaign, but implementing lasting change in schools occurs over years, not weeks. Organizations should be prepared to build or borrow expertise on quality instruction and to commit to the extended institutional change process that may be required. Similarly, funders who are truly committed to grassroots-led school reform will need to transcend the traditional three years and out perspective of many progressive foundations.

Avoid the money trap.

Economics is the leading context or frame for the groups participating in this study, and the references to the unjust treatment of low-income students and their parents permeate the interviews. An economic frame may define the way groups view their issues and, in fact, many groups focus on budget equality for low-income students. While a useful point of departure, a strict budget approach can lead discussion into politically swampy territory where, on occasion, dollar resources per low-income students may, on paper, appear higher than the local per student average. However, the respondents also provide extensive evidence that beyond financial issues there are sometimes more fundamental equity issues related to the quality of resources (e.g., teacher experience) available to low-income students. Policy advocacy organizations can work grassroots groups to construct equity analyses that enable them to push the debate past the size of the appropriation to an understanding of value of the educational resources the appropriation is intended to purchase.

Know what you need to know.

Based on our interviews, organizations need to align their organizing priorities with their information and capacity building needs and seek out allies among policy advocacy shops, other intermediaries, universities, etcetera that can fill those needs. Funders who want community organization grantees to succeed may need to assist them in connecting with the analytical capital some school reform campaigns will require.

Share the data. Share the best practice.

An education organizer listserv that cuts across networks could provide the foundation for dramatically improved information exchange among organizers. Since the overhaul

of national welfare policy in 1996, small, under funded welfare rights organizations have aggressively used listservs to coordinate days of action, obtain comparative data or referrals to resources, and provide one another with moral support. (Given a sufficient showing of interest, the National Center for Schools and Communities would set up such a listserv.) How can we collectively expand the circulation of the Center for Community Change publication *Education Organizing*, currently one of the best sources of best practice in school reform organizing? Our survey of grassroots organizations also documents strong interest in finding out about best practice in school reform and identifying on-line resources for comparative data. Is there a market for a megasite that centralizes data and policy sources for education on the scale of the Welfare Information Network (welfareinfo.org) or the reference depot at www.refdesk.com? Would organizers and neighborhood leaders take advantage of on-line tutorials on search techniques and evaluating data sites?

Intermediaries should move beyond the cottage industry stage of development.

Policy advocacy shops, universities, think tanks, and other intermediaries could enhance our service to the education justice movement through a few low-key networking mechanisms. These could include a shared website or shared sponsorship of the megasite mentioned above, an electronic newsletter, shared projects, joint fundraising, and electronic and face-to-face exchange. There is, for example, a relatively informal "education research group" which includes the NYU Institute for Education and Social Policy, Chapin Hall, Cross Cities Campaign, and Research for Action that shares projects and meets periodically to discuss issues of school-related data. Is that a model on which to build? Teachers and parents have used listservs to good effect; policy shops should consider setting up a list oriented to data sources, analytical questions, and opportunities for collaboration. Respondents in this study indicated a strong interest in fiscal data. How do we incorporate the state fiscal analysis institutes into the education justice infrastructure?

Policy and data support: undervalued value-added?

Funders who support education justice issues need to understand the contribution that intermediary organizations make to school reform, to effective civic engagement, and, potentially, to a next phase of a civil rights movement built around equal access to truly adequate education.[11]

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[11] For additional discussion on the relationship of funders to policy advocacy organizations, see National Center for Schools and Communities, *Penny For Your Thoughts*, New York, 2002.

Conclusion

There are almost 15,000 school districts in the United States. Some of them are doing right by their students; many are not. Where they are not, community organizations and grassroots activists like we interviewed for this study are or soon will be taking the lead in demanding universally available, high quality public education. They are framing the policy changes that must occur for such education to happen. And, they are mobilizing their communities to force those who are carelessly or willfully preventing our children from the receiving the education they deserve to stop blocking the schoolhouse door. The task for the rest of us—intermediaries, funders, progressive journalists, and policy makers who actually care—is to provide the access and resources necessary to leverage their local fights into the movement that the situation requires.

APPENDICES

A. Organizations Interviewed for this Report

B. Categories of Topics Raised by Respondents

C. Questions from Data and Policy Needs Assessment

Appendix A: Organizations Interviewed for this Report

Organization	City	State
All Congregations Together	New Orleans	LA
Alliance Organizing Project for Educational Reform	Philadelphia	PA
Austin Interfaith	Austin	TX
Boston Parent Organizing Network	Boston	MA
Building Responsibility, Equality and Dignity-BREAD	Columbus	OH
CADRE - Community Asset Development Redefining Education	Los Angeles	CA
CAFÉ - Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment	Society Hill	SC
Californians for Justice	Oakland	CA
Centers for New Horizons	Chicago	IL
Central Brooklyn Churches	Brooklyn	NY
Challenge West Virginia	Charleston	WV
Charlotte Mecklenburg Education Foundation	Charlotte	NC
Coalition for Alabamians Reforming Education	Tuscaloosa	AL
Colorado Progressive Coalition	Denver	CO
Community Action Project	Brooklyn	NY
DC Voice	Washington	DC
Democracy Resource Center	Middleboro	KN
Direct Action for Rights and Equality	Providence	RI
Highbridge Community Life Center	Bronx	NY
Indian People's Action	Missoula	MT
Miami Acorn	Miami	FL
Michigan Organizing Project	Grand Rapid	MI
Milwaukee Catalysts, Inc.	Milwaukee	WI
Milwaukee InnerCity Congregations Allied for Hope	Milwaukee	WI
Minnesota Acorn	St. Paul	MN
Mothers on the Move - MOM	Bronx	NY
Neighborhood Capital Project	Chicago	IL
Network for Inner City Schools	Knoxville	TN
Northwest Neighborhood Federation	Chicago	IL
Oakland Acorn	Oakland	CA
Oakland Community Organization	Oakland	CA
Padres Unidos	Denver	CO

Appendix A: Organizations Interviewed for this Report (continued)

Organization	City	State
Parent Advocacy Group for Education – PAGE	Brooklyn	NY
Parent to Parent NY	New York	NY
Parents 4 Public Schools	Jackson	MI
Parents for Inclusive Education	New York	NY
Parents for Public Schools San Francisco	San Francisco	CA
Parents for Unity	Los Angeles	CA
Philadelphia Acorn	Philadelphia	PA
Pima County Interfaith Council - Industrial Areas Foundation	Oracle	AZ
Providence Education Fund	Providence	RI
PURE	Chicago	IL
San Francisco Organizing Project	San Francisco	CA
South West Organizing Project	Albuquerque	NM
Southern Echo	Jackson	MS
State Testing Opposed by Parents - STOP	Scarsdale	NY
Statewide Parent Advocacy Network - SPAN	Newark	NJ
Tenant Workers Support Committee	Alexandria	VA
Utica Citizens in Action	Utica	NY
Watts/Century Latino Organization	Los Angeles	CA
WE-CAN	Cleveland	OH

Appendix B: Categories of Topics Raised by Respondents

Academics	Achievement, expectations, models, whole school, strategies, curricula, best practices
Accountability	Accountability of schools, teachers, and principals to students and parents; parent and student rights
After-school	After-school, enrichment, extracurricular activities, sports
Alternative assessment	Alternative/holistic assessment/evaluation beyond test scores
How to educate children	Strategic or macro issue: how to educate children
Understanding budgets	Understanding and analyzing school, district, state budgets
School specific/ comparative data	School specific and/or comparative data; social capital, contextual info
Discipline policies	Discipline policies and their impact on educational outcomes
Economics	Economics, econ and com development, poverty, employment
Community engagement	Parent, community, congregational involvement; SLT; community schools
Equity	Race, income, geographic equity issues in educational resources
Funding	School funding as an organizing issue or concern
Lockdown measures	Police, metal detectors, dogs, searches, bogus gang policies, etc.
Organizing capacity building	Capacity building related to organizing, politics, and policy
Other	Other
Privatization	Privatization, charter, vouchers
Racism	Issues of race and racism, diversity, cultural competence
Safety	Safety related to facilities and behavior
Space and facilities	Class and school size, overcrowding, closings, facilities
Special needs: disabilities, language	Special education, special needs, ELL/ESOL/Bilingual
Professional development	Professional development/pre-service/support for educators
Distribution of teaching resources	Distribution of teaching resources, retention
Quality of teaching resources and principal	Quality of teaching resources and principals
Testing	Testing, scores, standards, impact on curricula and students, etc.
Youth	Youth issues, youth voice

Appendix C: Questions from Data and Policy Needs Assessment

1. What one or two school related issues would you say have taken up the most time and energy for (group) in past year?

2. What do you think are the most important school related issues (group) should take on in the near future?

3. What sort of information or research about the public schools and school reform do you wish (group) had had when you began organizing around school issues? What do you know now that you wish you had known then? How would that information have been useful?

4. What did you need to know then that you still don't know? How would you use that information?

5. How are the school facilities and locations in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods in (city)? What causes these conditions?

6. How safe are the schools? What contributes to making the schools safe or unsafe?

7. Overall, what sort of positive or negative feedback to the schools in neighborhoods where (group) works communicate to students and parents? What do students and parents believe the school staff thinks about them?

8. What resources and programs do schools in (group's) neighborhoods have and what other resources do they need? What accounts for the level of resources in schools in your neighborhoods?

9. How are teachers and principals assigned to schools in your neighborhoods? How well prepared and supervised are they? What sort of systems are in place to help them do their jobs better; do they seem to work?

10. How do you think teacher hiring, placement, supervision, and staff development works at schools in other parts of town?

11. Talk to me about the ways parents are and are not involved in their kids' schools in (group) neighborhoods and what you think explains that situation.

12. We've talked about facilities, resources, teachers, principals, and parents. What other features of the schools or factors in the neighborhoods have a positive or negative impact on the quality of the schools?

13. When you meet with principals, school district administrators, or elected officials, what sort of information do you want to have to feel really prepared to negotiate?

14. How useful would information be about how schools in your neighborhood compare to schools in other neighborhoods in areas such as test scores, resources, teachers, safety, etcetera?

15. How useful would it be to understand the standardized tests kids have to take in the schools in the neighborhoods where (group) works, as well as the results of those tests?

16. How useful would you find knowing about how teachers are hired or assigned at the schools in the neighborhoods where (group) works?

17. How useful would knowing about programs that help teachers teach better be in your work?

18. How useful would you find it to understand the budget for the neighborhood school?

19. How about knowing about the budget for the school district?

20. How useful would information about the programs used for teaching reading and math in schools in the neighborhood where (group) works be for you?

21. How useful would knowing how decisions are made about building repairs and renovations be?

22. How useful would you find information about what has worked at other schools in your school district?

23. How about knowing what has worked at other schools in your state?

24. How about what has worked at schools in other parts of the country?

25. How useful would understanding regulations and programs to ensure parent involvement be?

26. What information about schools and education reform would you like to be able to find easily on the Internet?

27. Finally, what do you think is the most important thing parents and their allies in the community need to understand about the schools in the neighborhoods where (group) works?

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